

THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

# ELLERY QUEEN®

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a **NEW** short story by

**JACK RITCHIE**

*Albert had never failed his employers. But when is a hit not a hit?*

## **BODY CHECK**

*by* **JACK RITCHIE**

I had come to pick up my \$20,000 for services rendered. Jessop rubbed his jaw.

I waited. "Is there anything wrong?"

"Well, there's been absolutely no verification."

"Verification?"

"No verification that Douglas Lazenwell is dead."

I chuckled. "For a second there you had me worried, Henry. Of course Lazenwell is dead."

"There has not been one word to that effect in the media, Albert. Not one word."

I gave that some thought. I had killed Lazenwell early Saturday evening. That meant that his body must certainly have been discovered at least by Sunday morning. Today was Monday. "Nothing's in this morning's newspaper?"

"Nothing."

"It's *bound* to appear in this afternoon's paper."

"Perhaps, Albert. But we live in swifter times and I was referring to television. There was no mention of Lazenwell's death at any time on yesterday's news programs. Nor this morning. And when a man like Douglas Lazenwell is murdered, it should certainly get into the news."

I agreed. Everyone knew—though no one had been able to prove—that the source of Lazenwell's considerable income came

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from importing commodities from nations where poppy fields are unblushingly considered as part of the Gross National Product.

"Are you *positive* you killed him, Albert?"

"Positive. One clean shot. And I checked immediately to make certain he was dead before I left. You know how careful I am."

I had been waiting in the closet of Lazenwell's master bedroom with the door slightly ajar. Lazenwell had entered the room and switched on the lights. I had let him close the door behind him before I fired.

I had then stepped out of the closet, ascertained that my bullet had done its job, and then departed the way I had come, via the French windows.

Jessop wiped his glasses. "Perhaps he was wearing a bullet-proof vest, or some protection of that nature, and merely feigned death?"

"No. I know a dead man when I see one, Henry. He could not have fooled me."

"Could the victim have been some kind of stand-in? It's been done before, you know. Someone hired by Lazenwell to substitute for him on occasions."

I pondered. I had never actually met Lazenwell in the flesh before Saturday night. "Even if I shot the wrong man, Henry, the fact still remains that I *did* kill somebody. Surely that would have gotten into the news broadcasts even if the body wasn't Lazenwell's."

Jessop agreed. "Perhaps the body—whoever it is—just hasn't been discovered yet?"

I rubbed my jaw. "I killed Lazenwell on Saturday evening. When he failed to make an appearance on Sunday morning, perhaps his servants assumed that he had gone off somewhere for a day or two and felt no obligation to keep them informed about his whereabouts. There's a good possibility that his body is still lying up there waiting to be discovered."

Jessop nodded. "That's probably it. Somebody's bound to find his body before very long. Perhaps it was even done this morning. We should read about it in this afternoon's newspaper or hear it on the news." He cleared his throat. "However, Albert, I'm afraid that I can't give you your money until we have that verification. Rules are rules, you know, and I can't make exceptions."

He was right, of course. However, I did need the money badly. When I first embarked on my career—rather late in life—I had not exactly expected to reap riches, yet I had supposed I would earn a comfortable living.

In a manner of speaking, I had. I averaged two assignments per year.

The key word, however, is "averaged." My income could by no means be considered steady. As a matter of fact, before I had received the Lazenwell assignment, there had been a hiatus of nearly eleven months and I was strained for funds.

Jessop read my mind. "It's your own fault, Albert. If you weren't so particular about your assignments, I could throw a lot more work your way."

Yes, I have my conditions—my ethics, if you will. I do not kill willy-nilly. My victims must fully deserve to die, at least by my standards, and I do not take borderline cases.

After I left Jessop, I returned to my apartment to await the afternoon newspaper. When it came, it carried not one word about Lazenwell's death, or the death of anyone at the Lazenwell residence. The afternoon TV news broadcasts yielded nothing either.

I began to worry. Even if the servants believed that Lazenwell had departed for a few days, surely one of them, a maid perhaps, would at least have entered his bedroom on Sunday morning if only to make the bed or change the sheets. Had she simply been neglecting her duty?

It was time to put a fire under the pot.

I checked my notebook for Lazenwell's home phone number and dialed.

A man answered.

A butler, perhaps? Did people still have butlers these days? "Could I speak to Mr. Lazenwell?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but Mr. Lazenwell isn't home at present."

I was tempted to direct him to look into Lazenwell's bedroom. However I said, "Where could I get in touch with him?"

"I'm afraid he left me no information beyond the fact that he intended to be in New York for a few days."

"When did he leave?"

"Saturday night, sir."

"Did you actually see him leave?"

There was a pause. "Who is this speaking, sir?"

My research on Lazenwell had indicated that he dabbled a bit in paintings. "My name is Alonzo Jennings," I said. "Of the Jennings Galleries."

"Jennings Galleries, sir? I don't remember Mr. Lazenwell ever mentioning the Jennings Galleries."

Why the devil should a butler think that he should be privy to Lazenwell's knowledge of galleries? "Just who am I talking to?"

"My name is Franklin, sir. Mr. Lazenwell's personal secretary."

Ah, yes. Now I remembered my notes. William Franklin. He had been Lazenwell's personal secretary for some fifteen years. He probably knew as much about Lazenwell's business as Lazenwell did himself.

"My galleries are in San Francisco," I said, choosing a city sufficiently removed. "I've never had the pleasure of doing business with Mr. Lazenwell before, but some of my colleagues have mentioned his collection. I thought he might be interested in several Modiglianis I've acquired."

There was a pause. "You sell, and *buy*, paintings?"

"Of course."

"Are you calling from San Francisco?"

"No. I'm phoning from the airport. I'll be in town for just a few hours. So if it isn't too much trouble, would you just check the house on the off chance that Mr. Lazenwell has returned without you knowing it?"

There was another pause. "Mr. Lazenwell is not interested in purchasing any more paintings. As a matter of fact, he has decided to dispose of his collection."

"Oh?"

"Yes, he has decided to sell his paintings. All of them. Would you be in the market to buy?"

I thought that over for a few moments. "I just might be at that. If the price is right, of course. Are you certain that Mr. Lazenwell wants to sell?"

"Positive, sir."

"But you don't know where Mr. Lazenwell is at the moment? You can't get him to the phone?"

"That won't be necessary, sir."

"Why won't it be necessary?"

"If you are really interested in the paintings, I can handle the matter for you. Mr. Lazenwell has authorized me to sell them if the opportunity presents itself and he is not here."

I smiled. "Do you have all that in writing?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right then. How would it be if I dropped over there right now?"

"Just fine, sir. I'll be waiting."

When I hung up, I phoned for a taxi. It took me to the far east side along the lake and eventually it turned into a curving driveway which ended before Lazenwell's huge French Norman residence. The cab parked in the oval behind a large van on the side of which was lettered the information *Rossiter—Fine Furniture*.

Franklin had evidently been watching and waiting because the front door opened immediately as I approached it.

He was a rather tall man in his late forties with a worried look on his face. He immediately produced a twice-folded crisp sheet of paper.

The typing informed me that Franklin had been given full authority to sell the paintings. The signature at the bottom of the page read *Douglas Lazenwell*.

I returned the sheet. "Shall we see the paintings?"

It appeared that Lazenwell had them on display in various rooms, rather than concentrating them all in one place.

We stopped in the library first.

Frankly, I know almost nothing whatsoever about paintings. However, I gazed at the frame before me and said, "Ah, yes," thoughtfully. "How much is Mr. Lazenwell asking for this one?"

"He paid \$30,000 for it, sir."

I chuckled. "\$30,000?" I shook my head. "The best I could possibly offer is \$15,000."

He tried once. "\$20,000?"

I remained adamant. "\$15,000. Not one cent more."

He agreed. "Very well, sir, the painting is yours."

As we walked on to the next painting, we had to step aside for two men in work uniforms carrying a sofa.

Franklin felt obliged to explain. "I'm sending some of the furniture out to be re-upholstered."

We stopped in front of another painting.

"\$25,000," Franklin said.

"\$15,000."

He pondered a moment. "Sold."

After I had, figuratively at least, spent some \$100,000, we went upstairs to the second floor, yielding once again to the same two men, this time each carrying down a heavy elaborate chair. To my unpracticed eye the upholstery appeared to be in excellent condition.

We confronted a painting in the hallway.

"\$18,000," Franklin said.

I smiled. "Are you selling anything else, Franklin?"

"Else? You mean more paintings? Yes, the entire collection."

"I mean besides the paintings *and* the furniture. How about automobiles? Perhaps there are several in the garages that you wish to dispose of?"

He regarded me speculatively. "As a matter of fact, there is a Porsche I think might interest you."

"Franklin," I said. "Sit down."

He stared at me for a few seconds and then sank into one of the hall chairs.

"Franklin, we *both* know that Lazenwell is dead. I know he is dead because I shot him and you know he is dead because you found the body and are now taking immediate advantage of his death."

Franklin's eyes flickered warily.

"Let us put our cards on the table," I said. "You intend to sell Lazenwell's paintings, his furniture, his automobiles, whatever you can and just as swiftly as you can and then disappear with the money. Isn't that right?"

He said nothing.

"But that isn't very intelligent, Franklin. Not intelligent at all. When the police enter this case, as of course they will, they will find a stripped house. And putting two and two together, including your disappearance, they will not only conclude that it was you who did the looting, but also that you must be the man who killed Lazenwell. Every policeman in the country will be looking for you."

Franklin swallowed.

"Franklin, for this immediate gain—this chicken feed—you are not only risking a murder rap, but you are also passing up the *real* money."

"Real money?"

"Yes, the *real* money. Franklin, you have been Lazenwell's personal secretary for over fifteen years, have you not? And I don't think that you could have held that position for so long if he hadn't trusted you implicitly."

Franklin admitted to that.

"And certainly you must know every bit of Lazenwell's business? I rather imagine that on numerous occasions when he was either too busy, or unavailable, or simply didn't want to be bothered, he even let you sign his name to letters? Documents? Possibly even checks? And surely during all those years you must have learned to duplicate his signature so well that no one ever questioned it? Where did Lazenwell put his money, Franklin? Swiss banks?"



He licked his lips. "No. Swiss banks these days do not pay interest on secret numbered accounts. They actually charge yearly for the privilege of depositing. Mr. Lazenwell would have none of that."

"Then perhaps Bermuda? The Bahamas?" I smiled. "I would venture to say that Lazenwell has even trusted you to such an extent that on various occasions you even personally conveyed his funds to their overseas destinations? You were known as his deputy, his representative, his emissary? Did you not make deposits? Transfers? Even *withdrawals* without undue trouble?"

He hesitated and then admitted it. "Yes."

"Franklin, what you now need is *time*. Time to travel. Time to make withdrawals. But you obviously will not get that time if the world learns that Lazenwell is dead."

I sat down opposite him. "Franklin, there is no way you can keep Lazenwell's death a secret for more than a day or two more. And I suspect you realize that and that is why you are scooping up everything within sight. The people who employ me want their friends, their enemies, and especially their own employees to know that Lazenwell has transgressed syndicate rules and that punishment has been swift and sure. They will want this known or they will want a very good explanation from me as to why Lazenwell's body has not yet been discovered. What have you done with it? I hope you haven't buried it?"

He shook his head. "No."

"Good. It belongs in the freezer." I hitched my chair closer. "Franklin, I will now go back to my employers and inform them that by mistake I shot and killed Lazenwell's stand-in. Lazenwell, now realizing that there is a contract out on him, has hidden that body somewhere to create confusion and allow him time to escape. However, I have several strong clues as to where he might be hiding and I will proceed immediately to seek him out and kill him. And the syndicate will grant me an extension of time because I have never failed them before. The syndicate knows that I will deliver."

"And so for two or three weeks I shall 'pursue' Lazenwell from one point to another and even send back reports. You too will be traveling, but on other business. I don't know how much money you will be able to acquire, Franklin. I leave that up to your industry and ingenuity. But my fee for providing you with the time to act is a flat one hundred thousand dollars."

He shifted slightly in his chair.

"And when you are through with your mission, Franklin, I will



remove Lazenwell's body from the freezer, thaw it out, and transport it several hundred miles to some country road where it should be found a day or two later.

"When the police investigate, they will find all of Lazenwell's visible assets still here and intact—his paintings, his furniture, his automobiles. Everything. And they will find you wondering fretfully why you haven't heard from him for such a long time. They will, of course, suspect that Lazenwell had foreign bank accounts, but they will not know where, or how many. You will not have to flee as a pursued murderer, Franklin. You will be able to retire somewhere to spend your money without having to resort to the fugitive life."

Franklin wiped his forehead and rose. He went to one of the doors down the hallway—the door to Lazenwell's bedroom—hesitated a moment, then turned the knob. He did not step into the room.

I joined him in the doorway.

Lazenwell lay on the floor inside, exactly as I had left him Saturday evening, except that now the blood was dry.

I chided Franklin. "You shouldn't have left him just lying there. Someone else might have stumbled on the body."

Franklin seemed shaken. "I didn't even know that he was here, that he was dead."

I blinked and then stared at him. "You mean that he's been lying there since Saturday night and that nobody—"

Franklin nodded. "Saturday evening he went upstairs to pack a small suitcase. He really was leaving for a few days in New York. When I didn't see him again that night, I assumed that he had left. There was no reason for me or anyone else to go up to his bedroom since, as far as anyone in the house knew, he hadn't even slept in his bed that night."

I was aghast. "But the paintings and the prices at which you were willing to let them go? And the furniture, the Porsche—"

He smiled faintly. "I asked outrageous prices and was perfectly happy to settle for one-half or one-third. And I really *am* empowered to sell the paintings, you know. The document I showed you was no forgery. As for the furniture, Mr. Lazenwell was having it redone because he tired of the old fabric colors and designs. And the Porsche has given him nothing but trouble since he acquired it and I knew that he would be more than happy to get rid of it if he got a fair price."

I closed my eyes. I had never been so embarrassed in my life. Here

I had been going on and on, assuming that Franklin had been cold-bloodedly looting the house after concealing Lazenwell's—

Really, most embarrassing. And dangerous. This new Franklin now simply knew too much. He was a threat. Why hadn't I brought my revolver with me? Would I have to strangle him? Was I strong enough for something as physical as that?

I opened my eyes to find Franklin still smiling. Broadly.

Our eyes locked and it took me ten seconds to realize that actually we were still in business.

I smiled too and then we carried Lazenwell's body down the back stairs to the basement. We locked it securely in a chest freezer and I pocketed the only keys.

I traveled at Franklin's side and at his shoulder whenever he made one of his withdrawals.

We split nearly three million.

Down the middle. Fifty-fifty.

After all, it *was* my idea.

"Q"

## DETECTIVERSE

### PRO AND CON

by ELIOT SPALDING

The pro hit the bank before dawn,  
Rifled the vault and was gone.  
But his skill mattered not,  
He was speedily caught,  
And now the old pro is a con.

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